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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

23 March 1966

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: PROBABLE REACTIONS TO A POSTULATED US COURSE OF ACTION

SCOPE NOTE

This paper estimates probable reactions, particularly by the DRV, Communist China, and the USSR to the bombing program against North Vietnam postulated in "The Role of Airstrikes in Attaining US Objectives in North Vietnam," [redacted] of March 1966, hereinafter referred to as the "Bombing Study."

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THE PROGRAM

The postulated bombing program consists of two phases:

PHASE I calls for the bombing of a number of selected fixed targets:

POL facilities, the cement plant, military facilities, and prime

MORI/CDF

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GROUP 1  
Excluded from automatic  
downgrading and  
declassification

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targets on the LOCs. It also includes mining the major harbors. This phase is to be quick and intensive. It could be completed in two or three weeks, perhaps substantially less.

PHASE II consists of sustained armed reconnaissance on the LOCs in the northern part of North Vietnam and restrikes as needed on the fixed targets. This is to be continued as long as required and would be accompanied by sustained harassment of traffic movements and repair activities on the LOCs in the southern regions of North Vietnam and Laos.

## DISCUSSION

### PART I: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Part I of this paper discusses the general reactions to the postulated bombing program and sets forth the principal estimates upon which the more specific judgments in Part II are based.

2. PHASE I, if successfully carried out according to the postulated program, would involve about 4,000 attack and flak suppression sorties. Spread over a two week period, this would be about 2,000 a week, some 40 percent higher than the peak rate of 1965. The location and nature of the targets are more sensitive than those attacked in 1965, and the

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program will obviously reflect a new escalation of the US air offensive. This escalation would mark an end to the sanctuary status of the Hanoi/Haiphong area, the Northeast, and the 30-mile strip along the Chinese border. Mining the major ports would introduce a new element with broader international implications.

3. These differences would be seen by all observers as escalation to another stage. Most would see it as a strong demonstration of US will to prevail in the conflict. It would also appear to many as a step toward yet further escalation at a later stage, and would increase fears of a Sino-US war.

#### Communist Reactions

4. The Communist powers involved in the Vietnam conflict would share these thoughts, but the fact that the pressure had been increased another notch would probably have no immediate effect on their policies. They have been expecting such a step and have prepared themselves as far as possible to absorb the added pressures.

5. Among the Communists, a decision whether to retrench, continue, or expand the insurgency in the South will be determined by their assessment of five main factors:

- a. the course of the war in the South;
- b. the cost to themselves in manpower and material;

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- c. the risks to their own security;
- d. the viability of the GVN; and
- e. the effect of foreign and domestic opposition on the will of the US to continue.

To varying degrees these factors will look different when viewed from Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, and the Communist command posts in South Vietnam.

6. Only the North Vietnamese would feel the immediate impact to any great extent. They would suffer a significant rise in the cost to themselves and would feel their own security further endangered. The bombing program has little or no prospect in 1966 of reducing or even of preventing some increase in the flow of men and supplies to Communist forces in the South. Hence it would not force the Communists to end the insurgency because of lack of resources. The Communists would probably expect that they could make enough new propaganda out of "reckless US escalation" and "bombing atrocities" to generate increased international and domestic pressures on the US to desist. In this regard, we note that the program includes a number of targets in moderately to densely populated areas. This would provide the Communists with casualties and photographs to show foreign reporters, which would enhance the effectiveness of their propaganda.

7. Probably Communist China is the most strongly determined of the Communist powers that the struggle must be sustained until the US is humiliated and driven out. There are many reasons for this, including

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the principles of Peking's foreign policy, its position in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and, not least important, the fact that so far the struggle has cost China relatively little. Peking is willing to give greatly increased material aid and manpower (logistic forces, AAA units, etc.) to support the DRV's battle, but we do not think that it is willing to take high risks with China's national security for this purpose.

8. Our considered judgment of Chinese intentions is that Peking hopes and intends to avoid war with the US. This view is supported by many of China's official statements, by the caution which marks Chinese behavior, and by the logic inherent in the disparities of Chinese and US military power. We believe that the Chinese fear nuclear bombardment by the US, are not confident that the US would refrain from such bombardment, and are not confident of Soviet support in such a contingency. We think ~~that~~ the Peking would also be mindful of other possible US war measures well short of nuclear bombardment, such as a blockade cutting off imports of food. *We recognize the possibility that* ~~It is possible that we are wrong.~~ <sup>A</sup> Mao may think a Sino-American war inevitable, and as well fought sooner as later; he may identify Chinese interests more closely with the military fortunes of North Vietnam than we appreciate; he may take a view different from ours of the military capabilities of the two sides. But we continue to believe that China will not be lightly provoked, and it is this estimate which underlies the consideration of specific contingencies in PART II of this paper.

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9. Hanoi has policy convictions and ambitions as urgent as those of the Chinese, and among the Communist powers it would reap the most immediate gains from a Communist victory in the South. But it is the DRV and the Viet Cong that are paying most of the price for continuing the conflict. There also is almost certainly some worry among the DRV leaders regarding the persistently increasing Chinese presence in North Vietnam and the prospect that the conflict might grow into a Sino-US war with North Vietnam as the battlefield. We would expect, therefore, that any key break in the Communist determination to press on with the war would come earlier in Hanoi or among the Viet Cong than in Peking.

10. The USSR is clearly not enthusiastic about the Vietnam conflict. Moscow is not eager to see such a Communist victory in Vietnam as would redound to the credit of Mao and increase Chinese influence in Asia and in the world Communist movement. It is concerned to limit the damage to US-Soviet relations and, more fundamentally, to prevent the Vietnam war from escalating to the point of a US-Soviet confrontation. At the same time, Moscow's claims to leadership of the Communist world inhibit it from actions which Peking could portray as part of a Soviet-US deal to sell out the Communist cause in Vietnam.

11. On balance, these basic attitudes of the Communists powers add up to a strong likelihood that they will persist in the Vietnam struggle, for some time at least, even if it demands a considerably increased price.

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There is little or no prospect that the outside Communist support of the insurgency in the South can be physically stopped. Therefore, a change in Communist policy in Vietnam favorable to US interests is likely to occur only through impact on the Communist will. This could follow from a collapse of morale of the Communist forces in the South in the face of constant hounding by US/Allied ground and air forces there; or it could result from a conclusion by the DRV leaders that the trend of the conflict in the South no longer justified the price being paid by the DRV. The two are, of course, much interrelated. In any case, the erosion of the enemy will is likely to be a long process.

#### Non-Communist Reactions

12. In most cases, non-Communist reactions to the postulated program of US attacks would probably follow the general patterns of reactions to past US courses which raised the level of hostilities. There would be increased concern with possible widening of the war, along with increased determination to avoid military involvement and to keep any economic and social involvement in South Vietnam to lowest feasible levels. The exceptions to this general pattern would be principally among those countries already directly involved; they would favor the course of action. No nation would be likely to make significant changes in its policy toward the US or the Vietnam war as a consequence of this course of action. However, the

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mining of Haiphong harbor would cause certain political problems for the traditional maritime powers and would probably evoke protests from some of them. The initial spurt of attacks on previously exempted targets, producing civilian casualties magnified by DRV propaganda, would agitate those who already disapprove of US involvement, but this effect would subside over time.

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PART II: ANALYSIS OF DECISION POINTS AND PROBABILITIES

Early Reactions

13. At the onset of the proposed bombing program, US air attacks on critical targets on the main LOCs to China and, more particularly, in the Hanoi/Haiphong area would confront the North Vietnamese leaders with a difficult decision: whether or not to use their air force in defense, against great odds.

- a. They might use their air force only sporadically, as at present.
- b. However, the chances are at least even that, feeling compelled to offer what defense they could, they would see little point in conserving their air force, and would commit it in considerable strength against US aircraft.
  - (1) In this case, US forces might destroy significant numbers of DRV aircraft in the air. There would of course be US losses, especially if the DRV aircraft were equipped with air-to-air missiles. We know some of their MIG-21s are missile capable, but we do not know whether they are supplied with missiles.

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- (2) There are 40 or so MIG-15s and MIG-17s in southern China which we believe may belong to the DRV air force. These might be made available as replacements for DRV in-country aircraft lost to US action.
- (3) The chances are better than even that additional replacements would be forthcoming from the Chinese Air Force. This probability would be reduced if Chinese pilots were also required. If loss rates continued high, Chinese replacements would probably cease.

- c. If the US chose to attack the DRV airfields as well as aircraft, any surviving DRV aircraft would almost certainly seek sanctuary on Chinese bases. China would almost certainly grant such sanctuary.

14. At this point the question would be whether Communist China would let its air bases be used -- either by DRV aircraft or its own -- to attack US aircraft over North Vietnam.

- a. In our view they would probably not allow their bases to be used for any sustained or extensive commitment because:
  - (1) It would bring a high risk of US hot pursuit and attack on Chinese airfields, confronting China with the question of a major war.

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- (2) The Chinese Air Force is largely obsolescent and a poor match for that of the US. The Chinese leaders clearly believe that their advantage lies in infantry manpower and that they could hope to win only in a prolonged ground war.
- (3) The Chinese leaders probably fear that the US would welcome an excuse to bomb China, especially its advanced weapons facilities, and they would not want to provide that excuse.

15. We cannot rule out, however, the possibility of air attacks from Chinese bases. These might occur by accident, out of deliberate Chinese probes, or out of a Chinese decision at this point to take much bigger risks of an enlarged war.

- a. Accident. There would be considerable risk of unintended clashes. For example, two of the postulated targets\* are within eight or nine miles of the Chinese border. Attacks on these targets would be particularly provocative to the Chinese and, if US aircraft inadvertently crossed the border, the Chinese would almost certainly attempt to shoot them down. In this same region, chance encounters with patrolling Chinese aircraft which strayed into the DRV by accident

\*Targets #18.71, Loc Binh Highway Bridge, 21-45N, 106-55E, and #18, Lang Son RR/Highway Bridge, 21-50N, 106-44E. The latter is on the edge of a densely populated area.

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are also possible. If Peking and Washington both chose to ignore such an encounter, however, it would not necessarily lead to further escalation.

b. Chinese Probes. The Chinese might make some penetrations of the northern DRV to test whether the US could be scared off and whether China would be treated as a sanctuary.

There are precedents for such probes in the Korean war.

- (1) If the Chinese Air Force gave a good account of itself and the US generally stayed south of the border, the Chinese would probably gradually expand their operations over North Vietnam.
- (2) If the US inflicted heavy losses on Chinese aircraft and engaged in hot pursuit but did not bomb Chinese airfields, China would probably desist.
- (3) If the US attacked Chinese airfields, China would either have to draw back from the air war, suffering a serious loss of prestige, or expand the war and accept all the consequent risks. This is a most difficult case, and we do not know how the Chinese would react. The chances of disengagement would be greatest if the US attacks on airfields were prompt and were clearly a specific and limited retaliation.

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- c. A New Chinese Decision. Lastly, the Chinese might regard the inauguration of the postulated air campaign as requiring a decisive and high-risk response. We think this unlikely, but we cannot rule it out. If they engaged US aircraft over the DRV in this spirit, they would do so on a large scale and with the hope of forcing the US to desist through fear of escalation. If the US did not desist, the Chinese would be prepared to take succeeding steps toward a wider war, such as mobilizations and threatening buildups in South China. If these had no effect, they would then confront the grave choice of whether or not to launch a large ground intervention. At this point, much would depend upon the specific circumstances of the developing situation; in general, we think the chances of such an intervention would be less if the US, in the meantime, had not attacked Chinese air bases.

16. It is possible that the Soviets would offer Soviet air units to operate over North Vietnam from Chinese airfields. We consider it highly unlikely that the Chinese would agree to this because:

- a. The Chinese have several times voiced their outrage at past Soviet suggestions for joint bases or Soviet use of bases on Chinese soil.
- b. Peking is dead set against boosting Moscow's prestige and influence in Hanoi.

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- c. It would entail all the risks of US retaliation against Chinese bases.

17. Mining the major DRV harbors would also bring early decision points. (We assume the mining would be announced by the US so as to avoid accidental sinkings.)

- a. The immediate Communist response would be loud cries of outrage and an effort to stir up world opinion against the mining. Exploratory efforts might be made to test the minefields and to sweep or otherwise neutralize them. DRV and Chinese (and even Soviet) efforts to neutralize the minefields would probably be relatively ineffective and, in any case, the fields could be quickly resown.
- b. We think it unlikely that oceangoing merchant vessels (Communist or non-Communist) would try to run the minefields.
- c. There would be protests from some non-Communist maritime nations, but we doubt these would be vigorously pressed.
- d. The most important Communist response would be to divert seaborne traffic to other means of transport. Some ships would unload at Chan-chiang (Ft. Bayard) and Canton, and their cargo forwarded by rail, highway and coastal shipping.

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Rail traffic across China from the USSR might be increased (and this might cause further problems between Moscow and Peking). Some ships could offload to shallow-draft coastal craft at such minor Chinese ports and roadsteads as Pei-hai. The coastal craft, which are available in great numbers, could thence filter south behind the coastal islands. They are, of course, on the target list for armed reconnaissance in the Bombing Study.

Longer-Run Communist Reactions

18. We have estimated above that the Chinese would not take on the US in an air war in response to PHASE I of the bombing program. The question remains of Communist reactions to the entire program including the cumulative impact of PHASE II.

19. Impact on the DRV. PHASE I and the PHASE II followup would affect the DRV in several ways:

- a. There would be dislocations and disruptions of the economy, especially in the small modern sector.
- b. There would be substantial direct and indirect costs resulting from physical damage and the efforts at replacement, substitution, and dispersal.

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- c. There would be a substantial added burden on the DRV's manpower supply for defense and logistic tasks.
- d. The diversion of manpower and the disruption of transport could result in increasing although localized food shortages. If these shortages became widespread, popular alienation from the regime would increase.
- e. Whatever the effect on popular morale, the regime's controls would not be appreciably weakened. However, there might eventually be an aggravation of any differences which may exist within the regime as to policies to be followed.
- f. The movement of men and materiel to the South would become more difficult and costly, but could be maintained at recent or somewhat increased levels.
- g. However, a ceiling would be imposed on Communist capabilities to expand their activities in the South, but we cannot estimate the level of that ceiling.

20. DRV Reactions. As we said in Part I, the DRV would be most likely to respond by continuing its present policy. This would be true not only for the first several weeks but probably for much longer. In more detail the DRV response, much of which is probably already planned, would include:

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- a. Further dispersal of POL and other supplies.
- b. Further passive air defense precautions and dispersal of population.
- c. Resort to coastal shipping, primitive transport, etc.
- d. Further construction of by-passes, alternate routes, underwater bridges, etc.
- e. Mobilization of additional repair and reconstruction forces.
- f. Calls on China and the Soviet Bloc for increased logistic support and maintenance of air defense capabilities.
- g. Diplomatic and propaganda campaigns against the bombing.

21. However, as the losses and costs accumulated over time, the DRV might feel forced to make some basic change in policy. The general options open to it would be:

- a. A rapid and large input of PAVN forces to the South or even an open invasion across the DMZ. We think this unlikely because:
  - (1) it would be obviously dangerous to put such large forces at the end of a difficult and vulnerable supply line;

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- (2) success would be uncertain at best;
  - (3) it might invite a US/Allied invasion of the DRV.
  - (4) The chances of greatly accelerated infiltration would be higher if ARVN seemed near collapse or there appeared to be an opportunity to inflict a major military defeat on US forces. The DRV has sufficient military manpower to provide a substantial number of additional troops for duty in the South.
- b. A marked reduction of insurgency in South Vietnam and/or agreement to negotiate on terms which the US could accept as a basis for beginning negotiations. We believe that Hanoi would not do this unless it concluded that its chances of winning the fight in the South had become so slim that they no longer justified the damage being inflicted upon the North. We cannot estimate when this point might be reached.

22. Communist China's Reactions. Peking probably would increase its efforts to maintain or enlarge the flow of essential military supplies and logistic materials to North Vietnam, although movement of these goods would become increasingly difficult and costly. Our estimate above (II, B) that China would probably try to avoid engaging the US in an air war would continue to apply.

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23. The Chinese leaders are vigorous advocates of "protracted struggle," and a prolonged stalemate in the Vietnam war would be acceptable to Peking. It is conceivable, however, that such a stalemate might lead by gradual stages to a Sino-US war. Already there are large numbers of Chinese in North Vietnam working on LOCs and air defense, and the postulated US program would almost certainly cause these numbers to rise substantially. Most of the weapons used by the PAVN and many other essentials now come from China. As the conflict develops, it is possible that step by step it will become less Hanoi's and more Peking's war. In time, China could become the chief antagonist by almost imperceptible increments.

24. Apart from this, Peking could avoid a definitive decision on war or peace for China until such time as the US/Allied effort appeared to be prevailing in North and South Vietnam and there was a prospect that, despite Peking's urging, Hanoi would seek negotiations and/or cut back the Viet Cong insurgency. At this point, the Chinese would have to decide whether to accept this serious setback or to intervene directly in force against the US and Allied forces. By the time this point had been reached, many other changes in the situation would have occurred, making prediction highly speculative. We believe, however, for the reasons discussed in paragraph 8, that confronted with this dilemma the Chinese leaders would prefer a setback, which they would consider temporary, to a war with the US.

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25. If the Chinese did choose to enter the war with large forces, they could put US and Allied forces under serious pressure. Yet their capabilities would be subject to certain significant limitations:

- a. The formidable Chinese military machine is not geared to project Chinese power a great distance from China's borders.
- b. To move large numbers of troops to South Vietnam and support them there would present problems quite different from those of the Korean war. The limitations of geography rule out an operation on the Korean scale. It seems probable to us that if the Chinese decided to intervene with large ground forces they would enlarge the area of conflict to include more of Southeast Asia.
- c. Chinese naval power, including the air units attached thereto, is slight in comparison with US naval strength in the area. Nevertheless, it might attempt to attack one or more major US units.

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Soviet Reactions

26. The postulated bombing program and the mining of ports would pose new and continuing problems for the Soviets. Generally we estimate that they would seek to discourage further escalation by both sides. At the same time, they would feel obliged to maintain, and even increase, political support and material aid to Hanoi, although the difficulties of accomplishing the latter would be far greater than at present.

- a. With direct sea supply largely cut off, the flow of supplies to Hanoi would be almost entirely under Chinese control.
  - (1) This would weaken the Soviet position in Hanoi.
  - (2) It would allow China to observe and control delivery of all Soviet aid.
  - (3) It would enable China to challenge the USSR to open up the sealanes.
- b. The US air campaign would in itself be a demonstration of the ineffectiveness of Soviet-supplied air defense to deter the US, thus putting further pressure on Moscow to do something.

27. Moscow's most likely responses would be along the following lines:

- a. It would almost certainly offer more SAMs and fighters to the DRV and would provide them if China agreed to tranship them.

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- b. The Soviets might provide equipment and technicians to try to neutralize the minefields. Failing in this, they would be highly unlikely to risk their ships.
- c. They would take a harsher line with the US.

28. Beyond this, the Soviet response would depend greatly on the DRV's policy. The Soviets would prefer that Hanoi turn toward negotiations, but failing this they would probably have to consider more decisive action to support the DRV. It is difficult to conjecture what measures the Soviets might hit upon as reasonably effective and yet reasonably safe. Moreover, some Soviet actions might require Chinese agreement or cooperation. Among the more extreme measures might be supplying offensive weapons to the DRV or applying strong pressures on the US in Berlin, though neither of these appears likely. In general, we believe that the Soviets, for a time at least, would have to involve themselves more deeply in the war, and US-Soviet relations would be worsened. It is not impossible, however, that at some point the Soviets would decide that the USSR's best interests lay in disassociation from the Vietnam conflict.

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